AN EXPLORATORY STUDY ON PEER SOCIALIZATION TO CHANGE SELECTIVE MUTISM AMONG CHILDREN

WONG CHEN KEH

SULTAN IDRIS EDUCATION UNIVERSITY

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AN EXPLORATORY STUDY ON PEER SOCIALIZATION TO CHANGE
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WONG CHEN KEH

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ABSTRACT

The study aimed to explore the personalities in terms of anxiety and shyness, behaviors in terms of avoidance behavior and oppositional behavior, and social skills of children with selective mutism. The study also uses peer socialization to explore the changes in children with selective mutism. As a qualitative method of this study, the triangulation approach was used to conduct the four case studies. Four children with selective mutism were chosen as cases. Each teacher of the four children with selective mutism had been interviewed by the researcher. The data of interview transcripts was supported by observation with the children and document analysis. All the data form the initial codes, combine into one narrative, and report according to four themes. The findings show 1) children with selective mutism are high levels of neuroticism regarding shyness, quietness, and anxiety; 2) oppositional behavior only appears when the children first joined to school, however, they present avoidance behavior in the long term; 3) the children have poor social skills as they difficult in building relationships with others; 4) by using peer socialization, the level of neuroticism had changed, the children seldom to present avoidance behavior and start to interact with others. The characteristic of selective mutism had been clarified in this study and reduced the gap of selective mutism within previous studies. Teachers understand well on children with selective mutism had allowed these children to get proper treatment such as peer-assisted learning in school. However, the time limit of conducting this study affected that the use of peer socialization was only a suggestion for teachers to deal with selective mutism. For future studies, researchers encourage to have a longer time duration to conduct a long-term exploration of the case study among children with selective mutism by using peer socialization.

KAJIAN PENEROKAAN TERHADAP SOSIALISASI RAKAN SEBAYA DALAM MENGUBAH MUTISME SELEKTIF DI KALANGAN KANAK-KANAK

ABSTRAK

Kajian ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji personaliti dari segi kebimbangan dan segan, tingkah laku dari segi tingkah laku mengelak dan tingkah laku menentang, dan kemahiran sosial kanak-kanak dengan mutisme selektif. Kajian ini juga mengkaji kegunaan sosialisasi rakan sebaya untuk mengubah dalam kanak-kanak dengan mutisme selektif. Penyelidikan kualitatif ini menggunakan reka bentuk kajian kes berbilang. Empat orang kanak-kanak dengan mutisme selektif telah dikenal pasti menggunakan teknik persampelan bertujuan bukan rawak dan dipilih sebagai kajian kes. Seorang guru yang mengajar empat kanak-kanak tersebut telah dipilih untuk temu bual oleh penyelidik. Data temu bual dianalisis secara tematik dan ditriangulasi dengan data pemerhatian dan analisis dokumen. Dapatan kajian menunjukkan 1) kanak-kanak dengan mutisme selektif bersikap tahap neurotikisme yang tinggi mengenai rasa malu, senyap, dan kebimbangan; 2) tingkah laku menentang hanya muncul apabila kanak-kanak mula-mula menyertai sekolah, bagaimanapun, mereka menunjukkan tingkah laku mengelak dalam jangka panjang; 3) kanak-kanak juga lemah dalam kemahiran sosial kerana mereka sukar membina hubungan dengan orang lain; 4) dengan menggunakan sosialisasi rakan sebaya, tahap neurotikisme telah berubah, kanak-kanak jarang menunjukkan tingkah laku mengelak, dan mula berinteraksi dengan orang lain. Ciri-ciri mutisme selektif telah dijelaskan dalam kajian ini. Guru-guru lebih baik memahami tentang kanak-kanak dengan mutisme selektif telah membenarkan kanak-kanak tersebut mendapat layanan yang sesuai seperti pembelajaran berbantukan rakan sebaya di sekolah. Walau bagaimanapun, had masa menjalankan kajian ini memberi kesan bahawa penggunaan sosialisasi rakan sebaya hanya sebagai cadangan kepada guru untuk menangani kanak-kanak dengan mutisme selektif. Untuk kajian lanjut, pengkaji menggalakkan untuk mempunyai tempoh masa yang lebih panjang untuk menjalankan kajian kes yang jangka panjang dalam kalangan kanak-kanak yang mutisme selektif dengan menggunakan sosialisasi rakan sebaya.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ASD   Autism Spectrum Disorder

MOE   Ministry of Education Malaysia

ODD   Oppositional Defiant Disorder

SAD   Social Anxiety Disorder

UNICEF   United Nations Children's Fund

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1   Preface

According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorder-Fifth Edition (DSM-5,2013), selective mutism is characterized as a high anxiety disorder by lack of speech or failure to respond to other children and adults. Children with selective mutism generally have normal language skills to speak well with parents or selected peers where the children feel relaxed in a comfortable situation (e.g., home); but these children fail to talk in certain unexpected situations (e.g., school) because they feel anxious during social interaction, therefore, the children with selective mutism stay

silent when they are expected to speak (American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2013).

Selective mutism is often presented before the children turn five years old and usually cannot be overcome after the children enter school (Barnowski, 2019). Most children tend to find the school setting fearful, especially children with mental health problems such as selective mutism (Campbell, 2019). Children are usually stressed when they first contact the school setting. After weeks or months, these children might overcome the stress, yet, children affected by selective mutism are continuously mute in school (Rozenek, Orlof, Nowicka, Wilczynska, & Waszkiewics, 2020). Therefore, school is always the first setting where children show symptoms of selective mutism (Rozenek, et, al., 2020).

Children with selective mutism are stressed to imagine or understand the process of going to school, and the matter of what is going to occur at school has resulted in schools becoming a particularly anxiety-provoking setting for these children (New Harbinger Publication, 2006). Selective mutism is classified as a childhood anxiety disorder (Brimo, 2018), and anxiety is one of the factors related to selective mutism. Children with severe selective mutism tend to have high levels of anxiety; these children refuse to speak with any person in social situations (Starke, 2018). Yet, mild anxiety levels among children with selective mutism respond to others using cluster or whisper voices (Routledge, 2017). In fact, children with selective mutism are willing to have a social life, but the personalities and behaviors of selective mutism have stopped the children from interacting with people (Wijayanti, 2019). This point

showcases the differences between social anxiety and selective mutism. In comparison, children with social anxiety have a fear of performing, interacting, and getting observed. However, children with selective mutism are willing to perform, with their only fear being others' reactions toward them (Vogel, Gensthaler, Stahl, & Schwenck, 2019).

Selective mutism in children would result in a change of personality which in the end would manifest as avoidance behavior or oppositional behavior. Anxiety causes children with selective mutism to prefer being silent (Jones & Odell-Miller, 2022). Children who refuse to socialize outside and are unaccepting of new experiences are considered as having avoidance behavior (Khan & Renk, 2018). However, other studies argued that children with selective mutism who refuse to interact or talk with people are regarded as having oppositional behavior due to the children being stubborn in social situations (Capozzi, Manti, Trani, Romani, Vigliante, & Sogos, 2018).

Furthermore, previous studies showed that children with selective mutism frequently prefer talking to children compared to adults (Schwenck, Gensthaler, Vogel, Pfeffermann, Laerum, & Stahl, 2021). These children present behaviors including refusing to go to school or being inactive in group activities, which caused these children to be excluded from their peer groups (Holka-Pokorska, Pirog-Balcerzak, & Marek, 2018). In fact, once children with selective mutism become familiar with the situations, their communication patterns often shift from not speaking to using little speech with selected individuals in certain situations (Steffenburg, Steffenburg, Gillberg, & Billstedt, 2018). In other words, when children with selective mutism get familiar with the situations, their levels of anxiety might reduce no matter interact with

other children their age or with adults, and they will slowly try to be involved in group activities.

The study reported that if children study in a classroom with a small number of students (e.g., preschool or homeschooling), they could have a higher level of social interactions and increase their social skills (Maleki, Chehrzad, Leyli, Mardani, & Vaismorade, 2019). To link with selective mutism, if the children with selective mutism study in a classroom with a small number of students, it might reduce the level of anxiety of children with selective mutism. Young peers who are in similar age groups as the children with selective mutism can also become agents of socialization for them in preschool as these children can easily interact with each other. Peer socialization helps to improve children's attitudes and academic behaviors. Children with selective mutism are more likely to adjust their behavior through peer socialization (Wang, Kiuru, Degol, Salmela-Aro, 2018). Meanwhile, children with selective mutism can understand peers' behaviors and adapt or adjust to these behaviors after the children with selective mutism frequently interact with the selected peer.

That being so, the researcher aims to explore the personalities, behaviors, and social skills of the children with selective mutism in this study. Peer socialization serves as a guidance tool for these children to cope with stress, overcome anxiety, and adjust their avoidance behavior or oppositional behavior. Children with selective mutism could adopt valued behaviors by observing their peers' behavior and social skills. In other words, through these observations and learning through peer socialization, the level of anxiety and extreme shyness of children with selective mutism might be

overcome. Following their level of anxiety and shyness reduced, the behavior of children with selective mutism might change or imitate their peer's behaviors to adapt to social situations.

1.2   Background of the Study

Mental health among children such as anxiety, stress, and depression are one of the major problems in Malaysia by the year 2020 (Hassan, Hassan, Kassim, & Hamzah, 2018). To solve this problem, the Ministry of Education Malaysia (MOE) plans to increase the number of counselors in schools (Daim, 2019). Besides that, the MOE also puts more effort into increasing parents' awareness of the importance of developing children's emotional, communication, and social skills during preschool periods (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2018). Parents are required to be concerned about the needs of children to improve the quality of children's life in terms of their emotional, communication, and social skills through peer interaction during preschool.

According to Children with Disability in Malaysia by United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) Malaysia (2017), children with mental disabilities are often described in negative and worst wording, causing the acceptance level of children with mental disabilities to be lower than 20%. Besides that, children with selective mutism are always misunderstood, with teachers citing them as fearful, anxious, and shy during social situations, hence being ignored by their peers (Holka-Pokorska, et, al., 2018).

This had been proved in the report of UNICEF Malaysia, stating that children with mental disabilities have been described in negative wording due to general misunderstanding and explaining the reason for the low percentages of acceptance level in schools.

Children with selective mutism refuse to interact with unfamiliar people (Schwencket, et. al., 2021). Therefore, avoidance behavior serves as one of the common behaviors among children with selective mutism. Children with selective mutism had applied avoidance behavior, where they choose to be silent rather than deal with their anxiety in order to communicate in public (Alrabiah, 2017). Oppositional behavior also shows in children with selective mutism profiles as they are stubborn and refuse to attend school (Arigliani, Giordo, Vigliante, & Romani, 2020). Fortunately, children with selective mutism are not bullied or rejected by peers once these children get ready to join in activities (Longobardi, Badenes-Ribera, Gastaldi, & Prino, 2018).

Children with mild selective mutism are able to speak with selected peers, but these children refuse to verbally speak with their teachers, showing nervousness during classroom activities and would only use cluster or whisper voice to interact with their teachers. In severe cases, children who have selective mutism freeze in the classroom, refuse to go to the toilet, are not willing to eat in the classroom, and totally deny any interaction with teachers (Starke, 2018). Children with selective mutism had the ability for normal language skills, play, and join activities with selected peers (Halko-Pokorska, et, al., 2018). These children also rely on peers in the classroom to finish their simple

daily activities such as keeping their belongings, taking off shoes, or taking their seat with a selected peer (Smith-Schrandt & Ellington, 2018).

Based on the fact that children with selective mutism rely on their peers in school, teachers can use this as an advantage to integrate peers as an agent of socialization, which might be beneficial for selective mutism. Same to the goals of MOE, small group instruction among peers and children with disabilities could provide opportunities for learning and social skills (Winstead, Lane, Spriggs, & Allday, 2019; Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2018). Peer socialization provided the benefit of recovering the negative emotions as children with mental disabilities can observe their peers handle negative emotions and follow peers to socialize in the classroom (Johnson, Ford, Yu, Buckey, Fogh, & Evans, 2019). Studies suggested children with selective mutism require school support such as learning together with peers (Kamani & Monga, 2020). Children with selective mutism can read aloud with peers as reading together would take away their worries about reading the words wrongly and getting attention from others (Routledge, 2017).

The increase in mental health issues among children is becoming one of the major problems in Malaysia. Thus, the Ministry of Education Malaysia (MOE) plans to increase the number of counselors and raise awareness among parents on the importance of the emotional, communication, and social skills of children through peer socialization. A past study showed that children with mental disabilities are often misunderstood and have low acceptance levels in society (Holka-Pokorska, et, al., 2018). Selective mutism is one of the mental disabilities. Children with selective

mutism are also often misunderstood as people described them as shy or have social anxiety, hence being excluded by classmates because these children are silent in unexpected social situations.

Children with selective mutism presented avoidance behavior or oppositional behavior to deal with their anxiety. However, these behaviors are not proper ways to deal with anxiety as only cause children with selective mutism to refuse socialization and are likely to manifest other disorders in the future. Based on the MOE planner, peer socialization might be helpful in the improvement of children with selective mutism in terms of their personality, behavior, and social skills. Children with selective mutism learned to overcome anxiety in social situations by observing. These children can learn together with their peers, observe peer performance, adopt or imitate peers' behavior to adapt in a new situation and expand their social circle in the classroom through observation learning. In the long term, children with selective mutism might build good relationships among their classmates, interact with teachers and bravely join in group activities.

1.3   Problem Statement

Selective mutism is a rare mental disability that is related to anxiety (Rozenek, et. al., 2020; APA, 2013). The prevalence of selective mutism is difficult to know because this disorder is rarely studied, hence the confusion between this disability's criteria and low

awareness (Campbell, 2019; Barnowski, 2019; Podgorska-Jacknik, 2020). Although the statistical data does not show the prevalence of selective mutism in Malaysia, but the prevalence of mental health problems in Malaysia among children who fall under 5 to 15 years old is 12.1%, and within these percentages, 1.7% falls under anxiety, which requires immediate attention or remedial action (Malaysian Mental Healthcare Performance, 2017).

In other countries, studies showed that 0.2% to 2% of children were affected by selective mutism in preschool years (Skedgell, Fornander, & Kearney, 2017). Yet, studies showed that 17% of individuals are silent in certain settings but have no problems speaking at home. Moreover, of this 17% of individuals, only 32% know about selective mutism (Poll, 2017). Meanwhile, the percentages of children who are affected by selective mutism are not lower than 2%. Based on the study about low awareness of selective mutism, the percentage of children with selective mutism should be more than that (Poll, 2017). Due to the lack of awareness of selective mutism, most Malaysians do not know about selective mutism. Hence, children diagnosed with selective mutism fail to receive a proper treatment that matches their needs (Hassan et, al., 2018).

Selective mutism is a mental disorder that requires further study regarding the characteristics and treatment (Campbell, 2019). The characteristics of selective mutism are still under argument in several studies. All children feel anxious or shy in unexpected situations, but normal children will try to accept or behave aggressively when unsatisfied. In contrast, children with selective mutism tend to refuse, avoid, and

withdraw from situations (Welsh, 2017). Interestingly, most children with selective mutism are not shy or quiet. These children are willing to interact with selected peers in non-verbal situations or gesturing to make choices (Barnowski, 2019). Besides that, Driessen, Blom, Muris, Blashfield, and Molendijik (2019) also indicated that there are 20% of children with selective mutism do not present anxiety in social situations. Therefore, there is an existing argument in terms of the anxiety levels of children with selective mutism.

Besides that, the behavior in aspects of personalities such as the oppositional behavior of children with selective mutism has also been studied in the past. There is a present argument from different teachers' points of view regarding the behaviors of children with selective mutism. Some teachers believe the behaviors of children with selective mutism such as stubbornness, un-responding, and avoiding social situations had been described as avoidance behavior. However, these behaviors can also be described as oppositional behavior because most teachers feel that children with selective mutism are stubborn and not willing to join in group activities (Arigliani, et, al., 2020). Studies explored that the behaviors of children with selective mutism can be described as oppositional behavior or avoidance behavior, which are also present in children without selective mutism, making them not that different from normal children.

According to the figure, 69% of children with social anxiety disorder (SAD) were presented with selective mutism, therefore, SAD is the most common comorbid anxiety disorder with selective mutism (Driessen, et, al., 2019). Except for SAD, the symptoms of selective mutism are similar to autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and

oppositional defiant disorder (ODD). Children with selective mutism are often misdiagnosed as SAD or ASD because these children usually refuse to take part in social interactions and have trouble with social interactions (Sunderland, Afzali, Batterham, Calear, Carragher, Hobbs, Mahoney, Peters, & Slade, 2019; Clark, Barbaro, & Dissanayake, 2019). Besides that, children with selective mutism are also often misdiagnosed as having ODD because these children fail to meet the expectations of speech development and response in school (Barnowski, 2019). The misdiagnosis of disorders led children with selective mutism to receive the wrong treatment. This issue was included as one of the problem statements to allow the researcher to study selective mutism among children in terms of their personalities, behaviors, and social skills.

Due to the lack of exploration of selective mutism in Malaysia plus the argument and confusion among other disorders with selective mutism, there is a need to further study the personalities, behaviors, and social skills of children with selective mutism. Limited knowledge about selective mutism in Malaysia causes these children to be unable to receive proper treatment, which might trigger other disorders in the future. In fact, selective mutism is a debilitating disorder because the characteristics of this disorder strongly affect occupational achievement, educational achievement, and social communication development (Driessen, et, al., 2019). Other than that, children with selective mutism have a less noticeable presence in school, leading to difficulty in seeking help, making friends, or improving their cognitive functions. These would affect them in terms of their academics which include vocabulary in speech, narrative language, auditory serial memory, and language development delayed (Klein, Ruiz, Morales, & Stanley, 2019; Jones & Odell-Miller, 2021).

Thus, selective mutism needs to be further explored in Malaysia in order to understand the characteristic of children with selective mutism. Once selective mutism has been studied and understood, these children might get help from parents, teachers, or counselors to overcome selective mutism before they trigger other disorders and affect their academics. To prevent children with selective mutism from not progressing normally, parents, teachers, and counselors should be well aware of selective mutism. Parents, teachers, and counselors are suggested to incorporate peer socialization, which is supported by MOE, for children who have selective mutism to better develop their emotional, communication, and social skills in school. Peer socialization is known to help children with selective mutism change their personalities, behaviors, and improve social skills. In addition, children with selective mutism are able to adopt peers' behaviors and adapt to new environments through peer socialization.

1.4   Objectives

Based on the statistics of mental disability in Malaysia and statistics of selective mutism, the government should raise awareness and increase the knowledge of selective mutism in Malaysia. Parents, counselors, and teachers should be well-informed about selective mutism in depth to give proper treatment to children with selective mutism. Hence, this study aims to explore the personalities, behaviors, and social skills of children with selective mutism. Based on MOE's planner, peer socialization is also to be explored in this study in terms of the changes in children with selective mutism.

In short, the objectives of the study are:

1. To explore children with selective mutism's personalities in terms of

   a. anxiety and

   b. shyness.

2. To explore children with selective mutism's behaviors in terms of

   a. avoidance behavior and

   b. oppositional behavior in the aspects of personalities.

3. To explore children with selective mutism's social skills in terms of relationships with selected peers in the aspects of behaviors.

4. To explore the use of peer socialization to change the children with selective mutism in the area of

   a. personalities,

   b. behaviors and

   c. social skills.

1.5   Research Questions

Refer to the objectives of the study, there are four questions listed below:

1. What are the personalities of children with selective mutism in terms of

   a. anxiety and

   b. shyness?

2. What are the behaviors of children with selective mutism in terms of

   a. avoidance behavior and

   b. oppositional behavior in the aspects of personalities?

3. What are the social skills of children with selective mutism in terms of

   relationships with selected peers in the aspects of behaviors?

4. What are the use of peer socialization to change the children with selective

   mutism in the area of

   a. personalities,

   b. behaviors and

   c. social skills?

1.6 Theoretical Framework

Social cognitive theory is used as the theoretical framework to support and provide guidance for this study. This theory was developed by Albert Bandura who explained that children tend to imitate the person who is smart or talented, and they imitate behaviors that will be rewarded. The theorist believes that children's cognitive allow them to understand what happens around their surroundings through socializing in

exchange for important sources of information (Toronto, 2006). Devi, Khandelwal, and Das (2017) also agreed that the social cognitive theory allows individuals to learn through observation to develop their personalities, behaviors, and social skills.

Social cognitive theory is a learning theory with terms of reciprocal determinism between three factors, such as personal, environmental, and behavioral factors. In-depth, the personal factors of individuals such as feelings, thoughts, or self-perception can be influenced by environmental factors or behavioral factors, at the same time, environmental factors and behavioral factors also are influenced by personal factors (Devi, Khandelwal, & Das, 2017). Meanwhile, individuals are influenced by these three factors. If one of the factors changes, the other two factors of individuals might change too. For example, individuals observe from their environment and imitate people's behavior around them, which influences their personality. Therefore, the social cognitive theory is determined as a theory of observation learning theory to influence individuals' personalities, behaviors, and social skills development.

Bembenutty, White, and DiBenedetto (2017) illustrated an example of a child who has behavior problems while the child's father was moving out from the family. In this case, the environmental factors had influenced the child's emotional state, channeling negative emotions such as sadness, aggressiveness, and vulnerability (personal factors). Besides that, the child also changed their behavior habits and showed an increase in behavioral problems, such as arguing with family, refusing to work, and inactivity (behavior factors). However, researchers explained that if the child observed and imitated their peers on ways to handle this matter and understood what to do, then,

the child might change their thoughts and adapt to new environmental factors (Bembenutty, et, al., 2017). In other words, children could overcome negative emotions, adapt to a new environment, and adopt new behavior through observation from peers.

In addition, studies explored that applying social cognitive theory on school periods are crucial as learners require new pattern of behaviors to complete a new task through observational learning. Once learners observed new patterns of behaviors, the learners will replicate the behaviors or keep them in mind because the learners believe that they have the ability to complete the task by applying the observed behavior, which is defined as self-efficacy. According to Bembenutty, White, and DiBenedetto (2017), self-efficacy is described as the learner's belief in their capability to complete a task such as interacting with teachers, taking care of belongings, or being social in groups. After learners observe a new pattern of behavior, the learners have the ability to achieve the goal or task. Therefore, the learners would keep the behavior in mind for future use.

Finally, when the learners have the ability to complete tasks independently, they will adapt the pattern of behavior in mind and modify it as needed. The final step of this theory is called self-regulatory, as the learners' behavior had been changed or amended by the pattern of behavior that the learner observed (Bembenutty, et, al., 2017). For example, a child observes the ways their peers interact with teachers, at the same time, a child who shows the ability of self-efficacy would be able to interact with the teacher. Besides that, self-regulatory behavior will also influence the child's behavior and influence the child interact with the teacher.
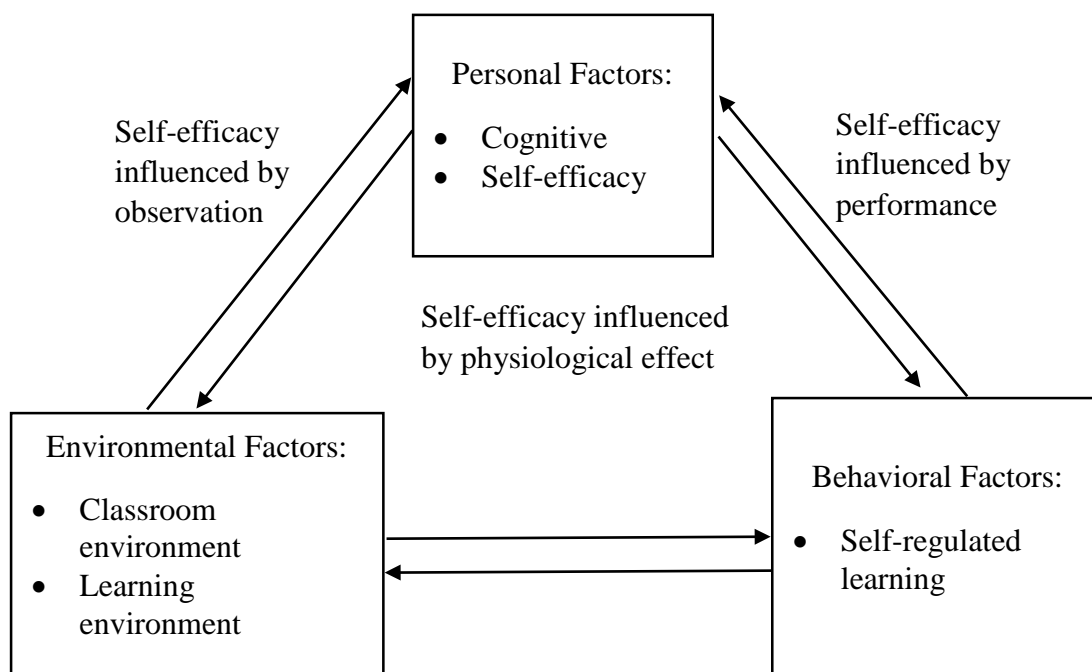
Diagram 1.1. Theoretical framework for the research. Adapted from *Applying Social Cognitive Theory in the Development of Self-Regulated Competencies Throughout K-12 Grades* (Bembenutty, White, & DiBenedetto, 2017).

Based on the social cognitive theory, the researcher understands that the personal factors of children with selective mutism include anxiety and shyness; the behavioral factors of children with selective mutism include avoidance behavior and oppositional factors; the environmental factors of this study include school and classroom environment. Based on this study, children with selective mutism learn by observing their peers when the peer assists them in terms of adapting to activities, completing simple tasks, or interacting with teachers. Self-efficacy is created when children with selective mutism observe that their peer is doing well in their tasks, therefore, children with selective mutism might keep in mind the peer's behavior, imitate these behaviors, and adapt to the environment. Hence, the self-efficacy of children with selective mutism had been influenced through observation during peer assistance. The personal factors, environmental factors, and behavioral factors of

children with selective mutism might change accordingly, such as the level of anxiety or shyness of children with selective mutism reduced, adopted peers' behavior, and adapt in classroom or group activities which improves their social skills.

1.7   Conceptual Framework

Based on the theoretical framework, a conceptual framework was developed for this study. The first part of the conceptual framework is to explore the characteristics of children with selective mutism in terms of their personalities, behaviors, and social skills. Linked with the theoretical framework, the researcher also explores ways that peer socialization changes the personality, behavior, and social skill of children with selective mutism for them to better adapt to school environment.

Children with selective mutism must be observed as a whole, which includes their personalities, behaviors, and social skills. The personalities of children with selective mutism are argued in terms of anxiety and shyness within several studies. The meaning of anxiety and shyness is similar, which are the uncomfortable feelings of individuals such as nervousness or worrying about something in the future or soon (Cambridge University Press, 2011). Besides that, children with selective mutism tend to apply avoidance behaviors to deal with their anxiety and shyness in school. The children with selective mutism avoid interacting with unfamiliar people when

unnecessary, and they prefer to be alone. In different views, these behaviors also had seen as oppositional behavior.

The social skills in aspects of children with selective mutism's behaviors have affected these children to have poor relationships in class because these children only interact with selected peers. This had resulted in these children being ignored by other children and excluded from group activities. In other words, children with selective mutism paired with avoidance behaviors or oppositional behaviors would result in poor social skills and small social circles in school. Therefore, in this study, peer socialization is used to overcome the negative behaviors of children with selective mutism by allowing them to adopt their peers' behavior and in turn increase these children's social skills in school.

Linked with the theoretical framework of this study, children with selective mutism observe their peer's behaviors and imitate the pattern of behaviors through peer socialization. The children with selective mutism understand peer's behavior through their self-efficacy and self-regulated learning on their behaviors. Taking advantage of children with selective mutism relying on peers and learning through observation, peer-assisted learning strategy is the tool to allow children with selective mutism to learn in pairs (Thorius & Graff, 2017). Peer-assisted learning strategy is used as a reference for children with selective mutism to learn by overcoming anxiety and shyness. In short, peer-assisted learning strategy as a tool of peer socialization for children with selective mutism observe the selected peer in order to decrease the level of anxiety and shyness,

adopts peer's behavior, and increase social skills such as expanding social circle in
school, interact with other peers and teachers.
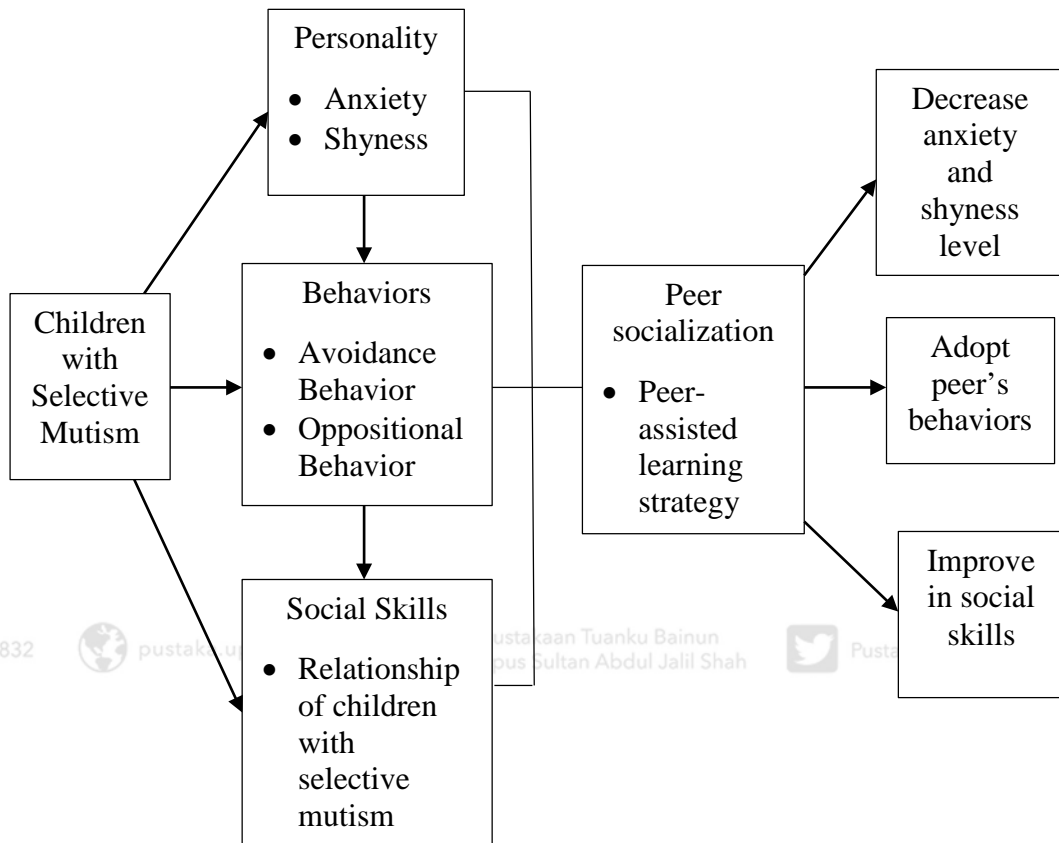
Diagram 1.2. Conceptual framework for the research. An Exploratory Study on Peer
Socialization to Change Selective Mutism among Children.

1.8   Operational Definition

Different articles studied the definition of children with selective mutism, including
personality, behavior, social skills, and peer socialization. To explain the key concepts
for the context of this study, the researcher reviewed these articles and defined the terms

of children with selective mutism, personality, behavior, social skill, and peer socialization.

1.8.1   Children with Selective Mutism

Khan and Renk (2018) defined children with selective mutism are those who refuse to have interactions, unable to speak out about their needs, and have poor social skills development after they enter school for more than one month. Jwaifell, Almohtadi, and Aldarabah (2019) defined children with selective mutism as those who speak normally at home, but consistently refuse to communicate verbally in other social settings, or these children only interact with a selected peer. Therefore, the term of children with selective mutism in this study is children with selective mutism can speak well at home, but problems in their personalities, behaviors such as refusing to communicate in verbally, and social skills such as only interacting with selected peers in school after these children enrolled in school for more than a month.

1.8.2   Personality

Weiten, Dunn, and Hammer (2018) defined personality as the characteristics that influence individuals in having unique and consistent behavior traits. Lodi-Smith,

Rodgers, Cunningham, Lopata, and Thomeer (2018) also defined personality as an individual's characteristic that is able to predict an individual's decision and behavior in certain life domains. Therefore, the term of personality in this study is anxiety or shyness acting as the unique and consistent characteristic which will influence the behavior of the children with selective mutism. Anxiety defines as a distress emotion related to neuroticism in children with selective mutism. Shyness defines as a congenital personality related to introversion in this study.

1.8.3   Behavior

Sundel and Sundel (2017) defined behavior as any movement or activities of an individual no matter verbal or nonverbal, overt or covert, that can be observable or measurable by others. Malott and Shane (2016) also defined behavior as the same as responses. The act, action, movement, and reaction of individuals to something or someone. Therefore, the term of behavior in this study is avoidance behavior and oppositional behavior acts as the observable action of the children with selective mutism to respond to something or someone whether verbally or nonverbally. Avoidance behavior defines as these children avoid to perform in activities and not engaging in unfavorable situations as they try to escape threats. Oppositional behavior defines as these children often associated with aggressive performance such as love to argue, not following instructions, stubbornness, or sullenness.

1.8.4   Social Skill

Ohara, Kanejima, Kitamura, and Izawa (2019) defined social skills as understanding and responding to someone in an appropriate way through verbal or nonverbal in a social situation. Maleki, Mardani, Chehrzad, Dianatinasab, and Vaismoradi (2019) defined social skills as having the ability of individual communication to interact with other people in a social environment. Therefore, the term of social skills in this study is children with selective mutism are able to understand peers, respond to them, and have the ability to build relationships with peers through verbal or nonverbal in school.

1.8.5   Peer Socialization

Abadi and Gill (2019) defined peer socialization as having a key role in modeling and shaping the social skills of experiences for individuals. Yousif and Mikhaylov (2020) also defined peer socialization as a relationship that has persuasive intent to influence children's behaviors and emotional development which allows them to adjust in society. Therefore, the term of peer socialization in this study is a persuasive relationship during peer-assisted learning strategy, where peers are models that allow children with selective mutism to adopt peer's behavior, decrease their anxiety and shyness level, and increase their social skills in the school environment.

1.9   Limitations of the Study

Limitations of this study include the scope of research, research design, and data collection. The scope of research is limited to the changes in personalities, behaviors, and social skills of children with selective mutism by using peer socialization. This study was not explored the language development and academic learning of children with selective mutism. The peer-assisted learning strategy is the only tool for peer socialization, it only helps in improving the behaviors of children with selective mutism and influences their social skills through observation from peers. Thus, the scope of research is not widely on the academic part of children with selective mutism.

Furthermore, children with selective mutism will not participate in the interview sessions because these children might refuse to communicate with the researcher. Therefore, the teachers who know well about children with selective mutism are the only participants in the interview sessions. But, the teachers might have some bias and confusion about the children with selective mutism when conducting the interview sessions. For example, the teachers reported that children with selective mutism are totally quiet and refuse to respond in the classroom, but when the researcher asked in deeply, teachers reported that the children with selective mutism will respond by using body language or whispering voices. Hence, the data need to collect from triangulation which is not only interviews, it also collects from observation and document analysis to provide validity and accuracy of findings.

Besides that, the small number of cases of children with selective mutism in this study resulted in minimal usage of peer socialization. The researcher also was not to explore an individual child with selective mutism from their four years to six years old. The researcher only collects the data from four years old children with selective mutism, then make a comparison with six years old children with selective mutism to explore their changes by using peer socialization. Hence, the findings from this study only fall under consideration or suggestion for teachers, counselors, or parents to change the children with selective mutism through peer socialization.

1.10 Significance of the Study

The findings of this study will be exploring the personalities, behaviors, and social skills of children with selective mutism in Malaysian society. Based on these findings, the knowledge about selective mutism will be increased, and the gap of selective mutism within the past several studies will be reduced. For Malaysians, this study provides benefits for teachers to better understand children with selective mutism and help these children when needed. This study allows children with selective mutism to receive proper treatment in schools and prevents these children from developing other disorders. In this study, the investigation of children with selective mutism will also provide broader general information about their characteristics for future researchers. Using these information, future researchers can provide new interventions for children with selective mutism.

Other than that, peer socialization is used in this study to the change of children with selective mutism in terms of their personalities, behaviors, and social skills had become a new strategy for teachers, counselors to suggest, and for parents to consider. Teachers or counselors will no longer be struggling with children who have selective mutism in the classroom as this study will provide a tool for review. Besides that, peer socialization is not only a practice restricted to children with selective mutism, but teachers or counselors can also implement peer socialization to interact with other children who are extremely shy, as their behavioral symptoms are similar to children with selective mutism. Linked with the concepts of MOE, parents are also able to further understand the importance and usefulness of allowing their children to socialize with peers in preschool, especially for children who have mental disabilities.

1.11　Summary

Selective mutism is a rare childhood mental disability, where if not treated, children with selective mutism will present other problems such as developing serious social anxiety, language development problems, or behavioral problems. Children with selective mutism are talkative at home, but silent in social situations. In school, these children always being misunderstood by teachers. For example, a teacher might see a child with selective mutism as shyness or stubbornness. These children are also often excluded by their peers because children with selective mutism refuse to talk with others.

The prevalence of selective mutism is increasing (Skedgell, et, al., 2017; Poll, 2017; Malaysia Mental Healthcare Performance, 2017), but Malaysia still has a lack of exploration and awareness of selective mutism. Although previous studies had reviewed the characteristics of selective mutism, but some gaps are present in several studies. The similarity of the characteristics between selective mutism, SAD, ASD, and ODD had also caused a risk of inaccurate diagnosis, which leads to giving wrong treatments to children with selective mutism.

Hence, the personalities, behaviors, and social skills of children with selective mutism are important to be studied in order to get a better knowledge of selective mutism and fulfill gaps from past studies. Following MOE's planner, peer socialization is also explored in this study in terms of observing the changes in children with selective mutism through the said method. Through peer socialization, children with selective mutism are able to observe their peer's behavior and imitate the behavior. Children with selective mutism can learn to release their anxiety and shyness, adopt peer's behavior, and increase their social skills with peers that they rarely interact with or with teachers in school.